

I REMEMBER THOSE DAYS OF THE FALL AND WINTER OF MY EIGHTH YEAR AS IF THEY HAD HAPPENED **YESTERDAY**. I REMEMBER LYING VERY **STILL**, BUT **WIDE AWAKE** UNDER THE OLD MOTHE-EATEN QUILT MY MOTHER HAD SEWN THE YEAR I WAS BORN, **LISTENING...** ALWAYS LISTENING FOR THOSE VERY FAMILIAR **SOUNDS...**



...THE **CLOSING** OF THE **DOOR...**

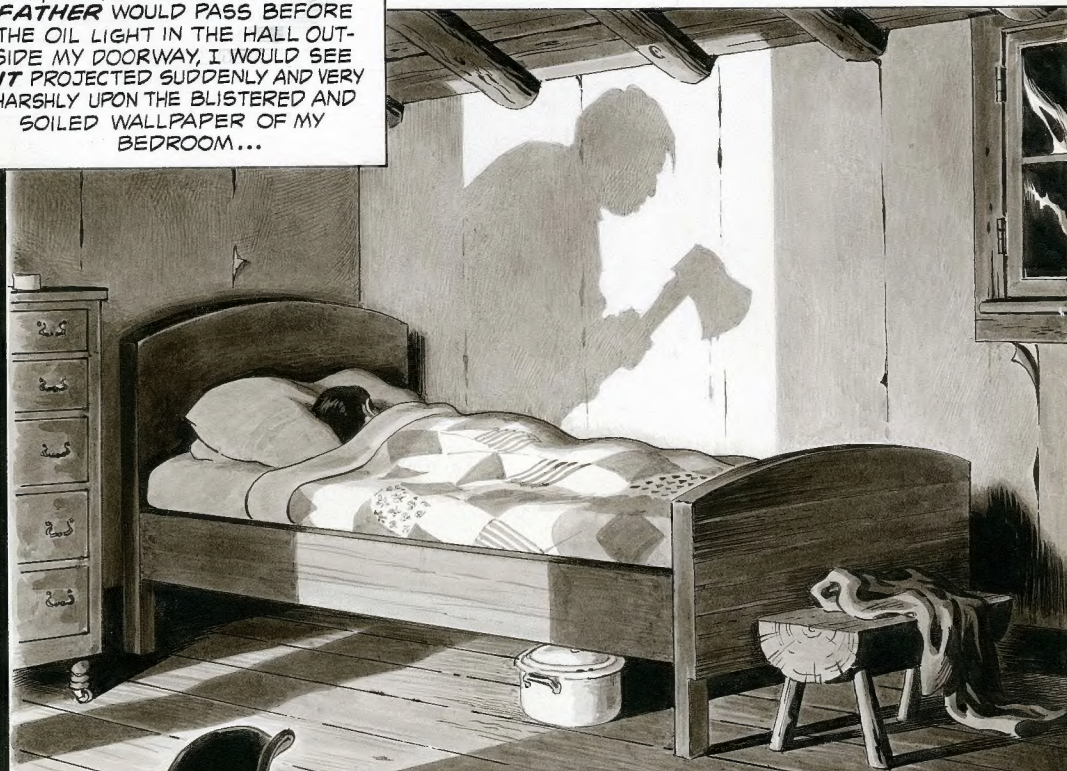


...THE SOUND OF MUD-CAKED BOOTS ON THE WOODEN **STEPS!** AND, EVER SO OCCASIONALLY...



...A SOUND THAT MAKES ME QUIVER TO THIS DAY WITH NAMELESS **HORROR** AND **REVULSION.**

THEN, AS THE FIGURE THAT WAS MY **FATHER** WOULD PASS BEFORE THE OIL LIGHT IN THE HALL OUTSIDE MY DOORWAY, I WOULD SEE IT PROJECTED SUDDENLY AND VERY HARSHLY UPON THE BLISTERED AND SOILED WALLPAPER OF MY BEDROOM...

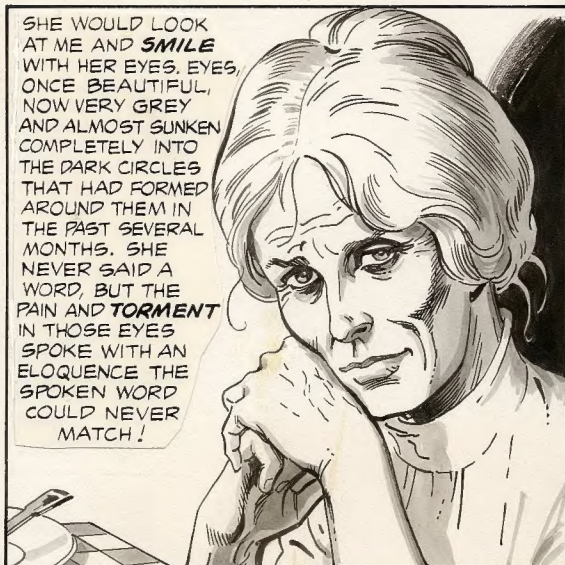


THE **SHADOW** OF THE **AXE!**

THE NEXT DAY, HUNCHED OVER A BOWL OF MY MOTHER'S WATERY OATMEAL IN THE WINTRY CHILL OF OUR KITCHEN, I WOULD **ASK** HER, VERY QUIETLY AND VERY SLOWLY...



SHE WOULD LOOK AT ME AND **SMILE** WITH HER EYES. EYES, ONCE BEAUTIFUL, NOW VERY GREY AND ALMOST SUNKEN COMPLETELY INTO THE DARK CIRCLES THAT HAD FORMED AROUND THEM IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS. SHE NEVER SAID A WORD, BUT THE PAIN AND **TORMENT** IN THOSE EYES SPOKE WITH AN ELOQUENCE THE SPOKEN WORD COULD NEVER MATCH!



I WOULD THEN SET ABOUT THE **RUNNING** OF OUR LITTLE FARM, MUCH NEGLECTED OF LATE BY MY FATHER. I HAD MUCH TIME TO THINK ON THAT CHILL AND WINDY MORNING AS THE FIRST SNOW BEGAN TO FALL!



IN SCHOOL, I THOUGHT LITTLE ON MY **LESSONS**, RECEIVING MANY VARIED AND UNIMAGINATIVE PUNISHMENTS FOR MY LACK OF ATTENTION. I SELDOM HEARD THE JEERING LAUGHTER OF MY CLASSMATES OVER THE ALL ENCOMPASSING ROAR OF MY OWN **THOUGHTS**...

RETURNING **HOME**, I WOULD ARRIVE AT THE PATH LEADING TO OUR HOUSE JUST IN TIME TO SEE MY FATHER DEPART, **AXE** IN HAND. IN RETROSPECT, IT OCCURS TO ME THAT DURING THOSE TUMULTUOUS MONTHS OF LATE FALL AND EARLY WINTER, I SAW **NOTHING** OF MY FATHER DURING DAYLIGHT HOURS AND LITTLE MORE THAN HIS **SHADOW** AT NIGHT.



IT IS THAT **SHADOW** WHICH DOMINATES MY MOST VIVID RECOLLECTIONS OF THOSE MONTHS.

WITH A VIVIDNESS THAT GOES BEYOND **MEMORY**, I RECALL THAT **NIGHT**...THAT DAMNED NIGHT WHEN I WAS AWAKENED BY THE SOUND OF THE **SHUTTERS** ON MY WINDOW SLAPPING AND CLATTERING IN THE SCREAMING NOVEMBER WINDS.



WALKING ON THE BARE HARDWOOD FLOOR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT WAS NOT UNLIKE ICE-SKATING BAREFOOT...AND UNDER **ORDINARY** CIRCUMSTANCES, I WOULD HAVE HURRIEDLY **CLOSED** THE SHUTTERS AND HASTENED BACK TO THE WARMTH OF MY **BED**.

HOWEVER, ON THIS OCCASION, I HAPPENED TO GLANCE TOWARD THE **BARN**.



RETURNING TO BED, I **PUZZLED** OVER THE SIGHT LONG INTO THE NIGHT UNTIL, EXHAUSTED, I FELL INTO A TORTURED AND TROUBLED **SLEEP**.

THE NEXT DAY, MY **CURIOSITY** GOT THE BETTER OF ME AND, USING A **KEY** I HAD TAKEN FROM ITS HOOK IN THE KITCHEN, I **OPENED** THE FEED BOX.



I REMEMBER **STANDING** AND **STARING** FOR SEVERAL SECONDS AT THE BLOODY, FOUL-SMELLING PULP... TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHY MY FATHER WOULD PUT PART OF A **SLAUGHTERED ANIMAL** IN THE FEED BOX. THEN I **SAW**, WITH A HORROR I FELT TO THE PIT OF MY SOUL, TWO **HUMAN FINGERS** JUTTING UP FROM THE BLACKENING **GORE**.



WHEREAS BEFORE, LIKE OTHER CHILDREN, MY THOUGHTS HAD BEEN DOMINATED BY THE LIVES AROUND ME AND THEIR EFFECT ON MY OWN, I NOW BEGAN LISTENING TO CONVERSATIONS THAT NORMALLY WOULD NOT HAVE CONCERNED ME...



FROM THAT **MOMENT**, MY WORLD BECAME A PLACE OF NAMELESS DREAD! I LOOKED WITH SUSPICIONS AT PEOPLE WHO, IN HAPPIER TIMES, I HAD COME TO TRUST. I GUESSED THAT MY **MOTHER** KNEW WHAT WAS GOING ON. HOW COULD SHE PERMIT MY FATHER TO...TO **WHAT?** I STILL WASN'T SURE OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT I HAD SEEN!

FINALLY, I HEARD SOMEONE USE THE TERM FOR THE FIRST TIME...

AXE MURDERER.



...THE CONNECTION WAS MADE ALMOST INSTANTLY IN MY TORTURED MIND.

THAT NIGHT, MY SLEEP WAS INVADDED BY SHAPELESS **HORRORS**... NIGHTMARES WITHOUT SOLID FORM OR SUBSTANCE THAT PIERCED ME TO THE CORE OF MY SUBCONSCIOUS MIND. IN THESE DREAMS OF TERROR, ONLY TWO IMAGES HELD CONSTANT THROUGHOUT... ONE, AN AXE ... THE OTHER, MY FATHER...!



I DIMMED THE HALL
LIGHT... AND FOR THE
LAST TIME, LISTENED
FOR THOSE **FOOTSTEPS...**



...THIS TIME, **CROUCHED,**
SILENT AND WATCHFUL
AT THE HEAD OF THE
STAIRS!



IT SEEMED AN ETERNITY
BEFORE I HEARD THE **KEY**
FUMBLING INTO THE
LOCK...



...ANOTHER ETERNITY
BEFORE THE DOOR
SWUNG OPEN.



CHONK!

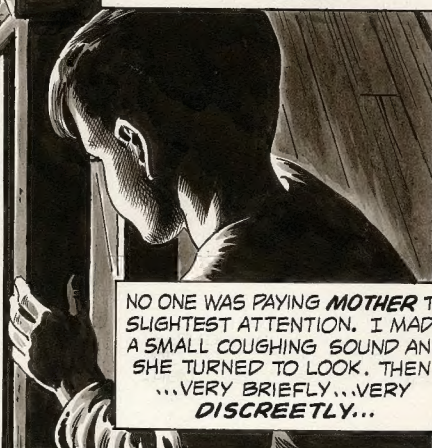


I LISTENED FOR ANY **SOUND** FROM MY MOTHER'S ROOM...HOPING AGAINST HOPE THAT SHE HAD HEARD **NOTHING**. THE HOUSE, HOWEVER, WAS VERY **STILL** AND THE ONLY SOUND I HEARD WAS THE CREAKING OF THE FLOORBOARDS UNDER MY OWN FEET!



I LOOKED ONE LAST TIME AT THE BODY CRUMPLED AT THE BASE OF THE STAIRS AND THEN PADDED BACK TO MY **BED**.

I WAS AWAKENED EARLY IN THE MORNING BY THE NOISE OF STRANGE **VOICES** IN OUR FRONT HALL. SILENTLY, I CREPT TO THE HEAD OF THE STAIRS AND PEERED AT THE SCENE BEFORE ME...



NO ONE WAS PAYING **MOTHER** THE SLIGHTEST ATTENTION. I MADE A SMALL COUGHING SOUND AND SHE TURNED TO LOOK. THEN ...VERY BRIEFLY...VERY **DISCREETLY**...



...SHE **WINKED!**

NOT KNOWING HOW TO WINK, I JUST **SMILED** AND RETURNED TO MY **BED**. IT WAS **SUNDAY**, YOU SEE...



...AND I **ALWAYS** SLEEP LATE ON **SUNDAY**.

